The Fifth Discipline

The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization

Summary of the Book

Written in 1990 by Peter M. Senge

The Fifth Discipline written by Peter Senge in 1990 impresses upon the reader the core disciplines for a successful learning organization, which he notes is paramount for a successful business in the knowledge era. A learning organization seeks to help encourage life long learning at all level of the organization and continually aims to be competitive in the workforce. (Senge, 1990, p. 6)

Dr. Senge, a professor of business at MIT, divides the book into 5 parts that are interrelated. The **first** part of the book is a critical look at the necessary components of the learning organizations and common pitfalls or learning disabilities present in contemporary business organizations.
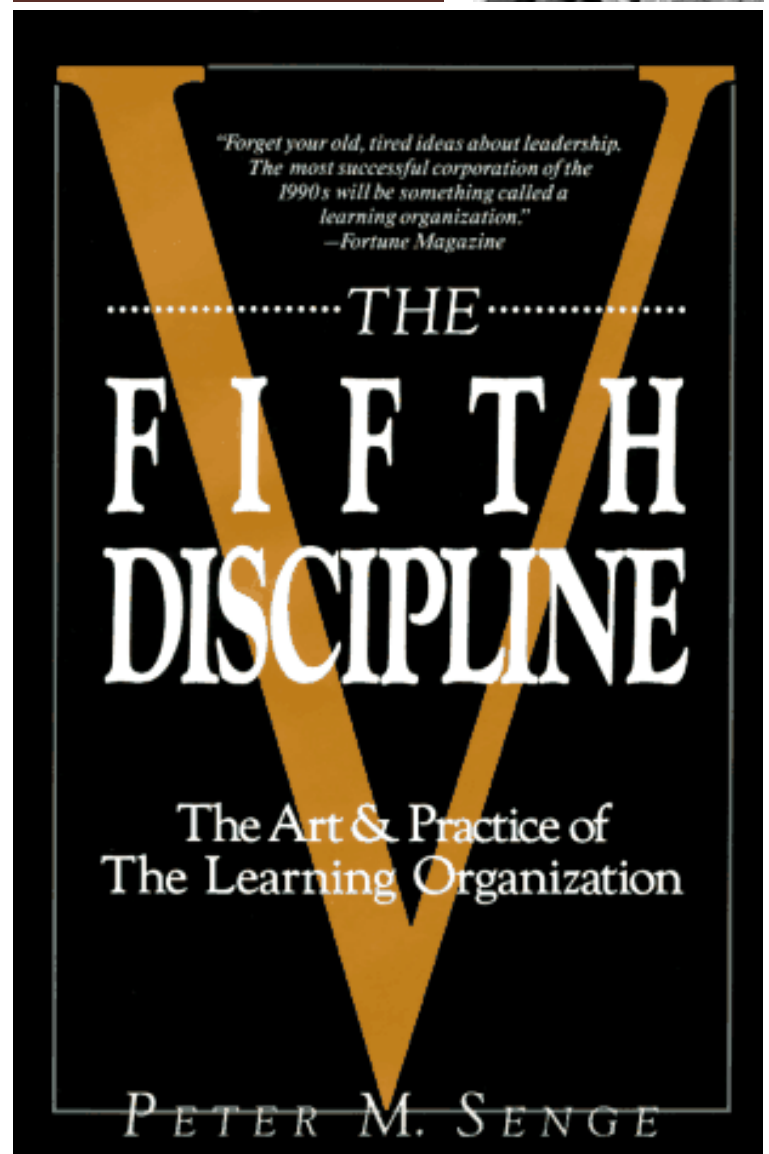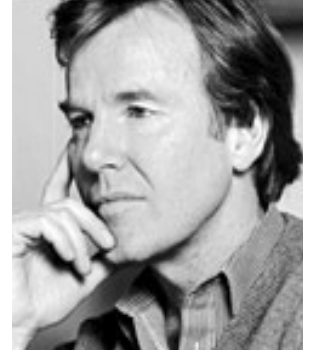
The **second** part of the book looks at the key concepts that are the necessary cornerstones to understand learning organizations. These concepts are the able to see the bigger picture, patterns, templates, and the importance of cause and effect in organizations.

The **third** part of the book dives into the title of the book and looks at the five core disciplines or principles that are present in successful learning organizations. The five principles are (1) personal mastery, (2) mental models, (3) shared vision, (4) team learning and **(5)** system thinking.

The **fourth** part showcases best practices and concrete steps or strategies that can be taken to help learning organizations flourish in any business.

The last part of the book is quite short and introduces the notion of interconnectedness and how we must see that we "nature (and that includes us) is not made of parts within wholes. It's made of wholes within wholes" (p. 371)

> "Forget your old, tired ideas about leadership. The most successful corporation of the 1990s will be something called a learning organization."
> —Fortune Magazine

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PETER M. SENGE

Part 1 (Ch. 1-3)
HOW ARE ACTIONS CREATE OUR REALITY... AND HOW WE CAN CHANGE IT

The Lever analogy showcases the organizations inability to look at the complexities affecting the organization and that many organizations are missing the leverage points where the smallest effort can make the biggest change.

The Beer Game

The game consists of three players in the game including a retailer, a wholesaler, and a marketing director at a brewery. Each player's goal is to maximize profit.

What the game showcases:

1. Systems cause their own problems, not external forces. Everyone in the game blamed others for their failures but refused to see their own position in the system.

2. There is no individual blame within systems but a series of workers with learning disabilities that stunt productivity.
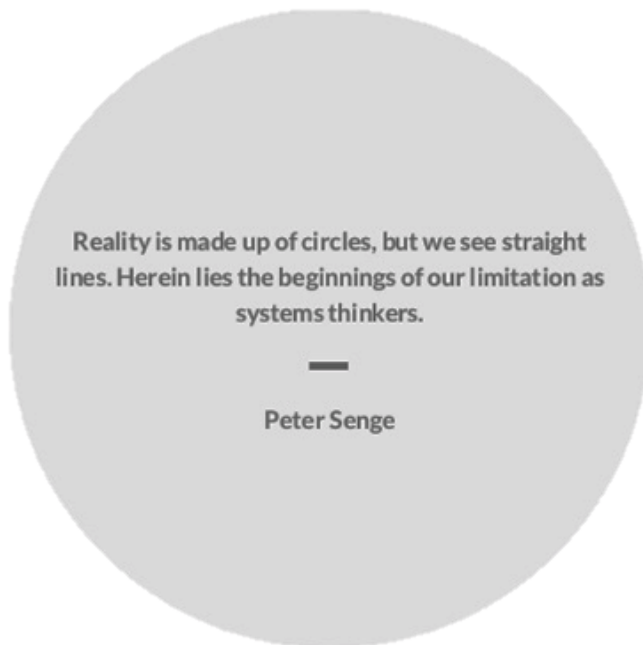
Learning Disabilities in Organizations:

1. I am my position- people who only see their position do not see the systems that interact as a whole and for results produced.

2. The enemy is out there- people need to understand how their organization or actions impact their success and not look from an external threat

3. The illusion of taking charge – proactiveness is usually misguided in business and we do not see how we contribute to the problem

4. The fixations on events- people too often see their lives, as a series of events need to see the organizational bigger picture.

5. The parable of the boiling frog- need to see slow gradual process is important in companies

6. Delusion of learning from experience- experiences help us learn but rarely do we see the consequences of these experiences.

7. Myth of the management team- the belief that management knows more but this only breeds skilled incompetence from many leaders.

Part 2 (Ch. 4-8)
The FIFTH DISCIPLINE: THE CORNERSTONE OF THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION

The world is influences by every action that we take in business. One of the biggest ideas within Part 2 is the understanding that actions are complex and circular in nature. "If we want to see systemwide interrelationships, we need a language of interrelationships, a language made up of circles" (Senge, 1990, p. 74)

Reality is made up of circles, but we see straight lines. Herein lies the beginnings of our limitation as systems thinkers.

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Peter Senge

The Laws of the Fifth Discipline

1. Today's problems come from yesterday

2. The harder you push, the harder the system pushes back

3. Behavior grows better before it grows worse

4. The easy way out usually leads back in

5. The cure can be worse than the disease

6. Faster is slower

7. Cause and effect are not closely related in time and space

8. Small changes can produce big results-but the areas of highest leverage are often the least obvious

The Art of Seeing the Forest and the Trees

The complex issues surrounding businesses sometimes inhibits leaders and management to be able to formulate a clear perspective on the details. Peter Senge uses the analogy of trees in a forest to showcase this problem. He notes that we need to be able to step back and see the forest as a whole and not look and focus our attention at a few selective trees.

Businesses need to understand what is important and what is not as important and to keep focused on important issues and not to be weighed down by the intricate details.

THE CORE DISCIPLINES: BUILDING THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION

Peter Senge discusses how to put into practice the Learning Organization using the core disciplines: Personal Mastery, Mental Models, Shared Vision, Team Learning, and Systems Thinking

Personal Mastery

Personal Master is a process of special proficiency that is lifelong and never finished or complete. It is a discipline "as a series of practices and principles that must be applied to be useful" (p. 147). It embodies two main ideas- (1) continually clarifying what is important including personal vision and (2) how to see current reality more clearly and work towards the vision. The rubber band picture below showcases the creative tension that is present from your reality to your vision.
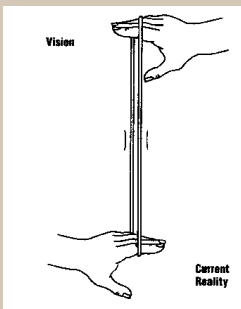
Mental Models

This is our worldview or paradigm that is deeply engrained in a person. It is how we see the world, how we understand our position, and shape how we act.

Managers must reflect on their own mental models and understand other mental models that are present in the workforce and alter their ways of thinking to ensure shared understanding of goals and vision of company.
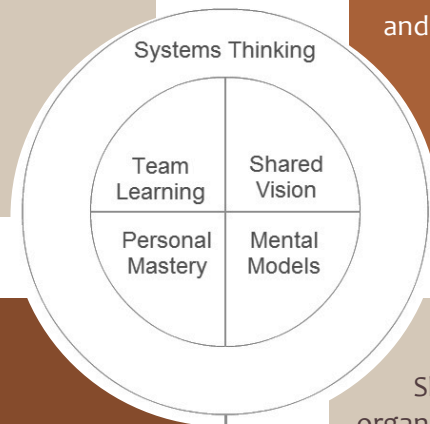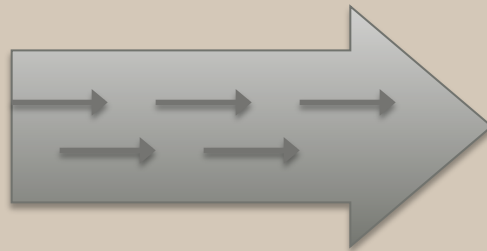
Team Learning

Team learning starts with dialogues and ensuring people are thinking together. It helps to discover insight. It is a process of aligning and developing (p.236) of a group of people to function as one, or as a whole

Shared Vision

Shared vision is imperative for learning organizations "because it provides the focus and energy for learning" (p. 206)

Systems Thinking is the umbrella concept that encompasses all of these disciplines to enable a learning organization to be actualized. It is the understanding of cause and effect are connected, being able to see big picture and patterns in organizations. "Business and other human endeavors …are bound by invisible fabrics of interrelated actions, which often take years to fully play out their effects on each other. (p. 7)

Part 4 (Ch. 13-18)
PROTOTYPES

Peter Senge then moves on to the key problems that may arise once an organization attempts to move to a learning organization. He reveals his answers of solving many underlying issues present in the workforces.
"Significant innovation cannot be achieved by talking about new ideas:
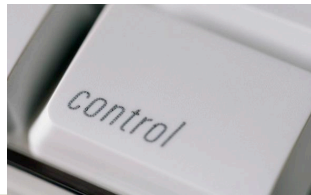you must build and test prototypes" (p. 272)

Openness

Two forms of openness:

Participative openness is the freedom to speak one's mind, is the most commonly recognized aspects of openness (pg. 277).

Reflective Openness is based on skills, not just intentions, the skills of reflection and inquiry (p. 278).

Localness

Localness is simply the notion of where control is placed. Localness means moving decisions and control down the organizational hierarchy to ensure everyone has a voice. This can be very hard for many mangers to lose control and to see themselves guiding ideas not demanding them is a huge part of learning organizations.
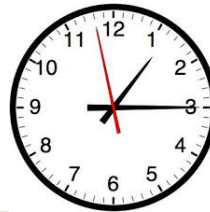
Time

Time is a very important issue in organizations. Managers need to take time to learn, time to reflect, and time with their children.

"One cannot build a learning organization on a foundation of broken homes and strained personal relationships" (p. 312).

Microworlds

People learn best from first hand experience, companies need to strive to create learning activities or learning simulations to help people understand cause and effect for future business plans.

Part 5 (Ch. 19-21)
CODA

The Indivisible Whole:

Peter Senge ends his book with the beautiful notion of wholeism. The universe is not made up of parts to create a whole, but made up of many smaller whole systems that creates a large whole. The world-people, nature, objects are animate, balanced, and whole so must our organizations.

Discussion Questions after reading the 5th Discipline

- What are the first steps needed to really operationalize your business/ organization into a learning organization?

- How do we help linear thinkers to begin to see the non-liner world?

- What does a company do when ideas fall outside one of Peter Senge five disciplines?

- How does one change their mental model that has been embedded through socialization and rewards and merits in the workforce?

Critical Evaluation of 5th Discipline

This book is aimed at business organizations with a strong business concept embedded in the examples and wording but it has strong implications for all forms of leaders within the Educational field. The 5 disciplines (personal mastery, shared vision, systems thinking, team learning, and mental models) all can help teachers, educators, and leaders to emphasis and deepen their knowledge of what to teach, how to teach it, and the way in which you present yourself as a teacher.

Without realizing the depth of his information, Senge's vision matches that of Indigenous knowledge and paradigm. His knowledge on mental models could easily be called paradigms and creates a map for non-indigenous people to understand Indigenous knowledge through the lens of concepts of a learning organization. The concepts of understanding the linear language used in English language, systems of interconnectedness, and life long learning are all paramount to understand Indigenous knowledge. As an Indigenous woman, the parallels to his teachings and the teaching of Indigenous knowledge were amazingly similar and succinct. It gave me a different approach to help teach the beauty of Indigenous knowledge from a different perspective.

This book at times was interesting but since not all individuals come from a business mindset, its concepts could be hard to grasp. The examples in the book really helped to cement the information and showcase real world scenarios for his very philosophical beliefs. He nicely infused real world practicality within a very philosophical based ideology.

References:

Senge, P. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organizations.* New York: Doubleday

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